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HISTORICAL IDEALS AND THE GREAT WAR

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In the universal recasting of values attendant upon a catastrophe which is reshaping the entire world, the student of history is summoned to take stock, not so much of where he stands, as of whither he is drifting, or, if he be a particularly hardy soul, even to forecast his path of leadership. In the process some idols of gold may reveal their tinsel, while the stone rejected of the builder may furnish the foundation for a new edifice. Particularly does the economic school of history encounter the challenge which confronts all things German. And the entire question of whether the historian may cherish any purpose beyond the colorless truth of the annalist is reopened. Is truth alone, however irrelevant it may appear to the issues of the moment, by its very nature predestined to set us free? Hence is it of and for itself a sufficient object for the historian? Again, is a human being so scientifically detached from the currents of the life about him as to be able to center his whole mind on a dispassionate tabulation of historical facts really entitled to call himself a historian? In other words, can the historical scholar safely ignore the passions of men and, fixing his eyes upon the dead past, like another Joshua cause the sun to stand still while he numbers the tribes of Israel? Is it certain that monographs and special researches really photograph human life at given periods, or does not the doubt insinuate itself that these periods are themselves unintelligible even to the most specialized of scholars, save as viewed through the passions of living men, and even then with allowance for dynamic forces which have modified man's outlook during the centuries that history has kept watch?

The present paper is rather a question than an answer, but it approaches the issues with a threefold bias: first, that the economic school of historians is too completely in the saddle; secondly, that

if he gives due recognition to the pros and cons, the historian having adorned the tale is as much entitled as other men to point the moral; and thirdly, that it is not inconsistent with a monastic and celibate search for, and adoration of, truth to admit the glow of patriotism. Indeed it well may be the historian's war mission to dignify and rationalize the temper of the community. When men of redder blood rush to arms for the preservation of the age-long heritage, may not the scholar also say, "I am the heir of the monk who saved antiquity from the brand of the spoiler. I also serve"? In the white heat of conflict, as in less troubled times, may it not prove true that "they also serve who only stand and wait"?

Yet here the enthusiast is called to account by the economic historian. The latter is close to the traditional ideals of cloistered calm when he subordinates the claims of patriotism to an imagined cosmopolitanism wherein, with predetermined unity of theme, he views his own as only one of many peoples obedient to purely economic motivation, engaged in a series of vain struggles which mark the rise and fall of conflicting economic systems and empires. This seeming breadth of vision is of course illusory. Though he includes cosmos in his scope, the economic historian is as restricted in his field as he who applies a more human compass to a narrower radius. But within his self-appointed limitations the economic historian is entitled to the respect which inheres in orthodoxy, and the scholar who seeks a more liberal explanation of human conduct is undoubtedly on the defensive as against the dominant economic school.

Nevertheless, not even the least emotional of scholars can wholly escape the glory of the time. In hours of crisis Truth looms larger, and as she rides upon the storm like a mighty wind and with the noise of many waters the historian scorns a purely platonic quest and seeks to grasp her whole. History thus threatens to become the biography of a vision with startling effect upon so sedate a muse. The objective point of view, so indispensable to orthodox scholarship, is sacrificed to a rose-colored portrayal of neither history nor prophecy, but of what at best is the higher morality of our day. Thus history is prostituted to ethics. The whole sweep of the past is evoked to prove that the world has been guided by

an ever watchful Providence to an increasingly apparent goal of universal democracy as the curative for all the major social ills. If one chooses to forget long periods when important sections of the human race were not wholly unhappy under a system which was manifestly designed to promote the welfare of man by excluding him from self-government, this democratic hypothesis is not incredible. But is it properly the function of the historian to glorify democracy? May that not more legitimately be the province of the publicist or the statesman? And is the historical scholar *ipso facto* entitled to count himself in the latter class? Moreover, is there not a very real danger that his war-born excess of fervor may lead the historian into suppressions and exaggerations which would stagger his calmer self? True patriotism allies with reason in urging, not fanaticism, but a quiet appreciation of those factors which have made for a national honor. It decries a flamboyant eagle-spreading which would be as ridiculous in us as it is in the Germans.

Our enemies furnish us a horrible object-lesson in this connection. Ever since the appearance of Mommsen's *History of Rome* the self-glorifying German scholarship has gained momentum at the expense of the truth ideal. Mommsen's belittling of the republican period and his emphasis upon the empire as the heyday of Rome have produced appalling reflexes among more recent historians in a veneration for imperial Germany in contrast with the liberal and cultural glories of the erstwhile states. Mommsen's deification of Caesar has an even more obvious counter in the Hohenzollern cult so assiduously fostered by an educational system completely subservient to imperial and dynastic glorification. Nor have the votaries at this shrine of an imperialized and truth-denatured history been without their reward. The alliance between scholarly and official Germany has been profitable to both, and German historical scholars have obtained dignities and prizes unknown in democracies. But by making unto itself friends with the Mammon of Unrighteousness recent German nationalistic scholarship is revealed in all its nakedness as bankrupt of the truth ideal as the German government is of the moral.

American historical scholarship and teaching are open to no such indictment. The self-satisfaction of our earlier textbooks was

rather the harmless cackle of an egg-layer than the shriek of a war eagle. And if our children until recently maintained that our national policies have been invariably blameless and our successes in peace and war alike uninterrupted, they do so no more. The spirit of muckraking has transferred itself from the popular magazines into the soberer domain of history. To be strictly modern, the textbook must inoculate our youth with cynicism as a counter-irritant against patriotism. And lo! the sane Fourth is upon us.

Yet are we not without blame, for as citizens we are incapable of a pure objectivity toward our country's past. Tossed between the Scylla of tale-adorning and the Charybdis of moral-pointing, we succumb to both and feed our hungry sheep on morsels of intrigue and warnings against the crafts of national banks, the cruelties of slavery, the corruptions of Tweed *et al.*, the ruthlessness of business exploitation, and all the sins of the world, the flesh, and the devil. Verily our sin is ever before us. Small wonder that some of us sigh for a more cheerful gospel, or else for the plain truth, at present concealed in the happy valley which lies somewhere between hypochondria and braggadocio.

It is in this chastened mood that we approach the Great War. And as the nation calls upon every man to do his duty, no scholar can avoid a dialogue with a conscience which will persist in putting personal questions not unlike the following: Can you serve two masters, truth and your country? Or can you honestly hold that your country monopolizes truth and that your allegiance is therefore undivided? Can you in decency sacrifice truth to patriotism or patriotism to truth? Or if your path of investigation happens to be innocuous, is it fair to pursue favorite researches into Mesopotamian tablets or the origin of Pseudo-Isidorean Decretals when your country calls for just such talents as you possess for an exposition of her own historical evolution which made the war inevitable?

In a mind trained to historical criticism and wedded to truth for truth's sake, questions of the sort enumerated provoke a moral conflict. Is it conceivable that our country could demand intellectual dishonesty? And if so, does not a loftier duty compel refusal? The answer is fortunately far simpler than the question.

Our country is too surely the "ark then of freedom's foundation" ever to require sophistry in her scholars. And however erring the course of deluded men may seem to a critic of both past and present, he is no true observer of life who bases its grandest deeds and ideals upon the shoals of falsehood. There is that in American history which, viewed largely, must lift a man of soul far above the analysis of petty deeds and greedy motives into a higher table-land where the destiny of man is marching toward fulfilment. When the trumpet calls the hero to die for the highest that he knows, it should arouse the recluse to a larger vision and a more generous interpretation. He may be aware that his countrymen are mortal, that their deeds are imperfect, and that they have not risen to the fulness of that stature which God intended. But the greatness of the hour should lift him above the pride of scholarship into a vision of that sacrifice and self-devotion which made even imperfection possible, and which in some mysterious way are shaping the world toward new ends.

To take this high ground one must rid himself of the economic bogey. In economic science the automaton of the hedonistic calculus was long ago discredited as an impossible fiction, but historians of the new economic and geographic school have resuscitated him, not as an individual, but as a whole nation. It is easy to recognize in the individual a multitude of interests only slightly dependent upon economic foundations. He is a creature of impulses, passions, and ideals far beyond the capacity of mouth and stomach to gratify. Yet when we analyze his political and social relations, which afford the individual full range for the larger emotional existence, we are prone, perhaps from dismay at the complexity of the situation, to rest our explanation upon only one of his many avenues of interest, and in an economic interpretation of history to resolve a complex which inevitably defies a single solution. There does exist a legitimate sphere of economic interpretation, but its very simplicity should give warning of its incompleteness and compel a broader approach.

Economic malcontents and opponents of our war policy expose themselves to a twofold refutation, and truth and patriotism alike admonish the scholar to enter the lists. First, the socialists and

other "antis," by proclaiming this a capitalists' war, ignore the very obvious fact just noted that a purely economic interpretation is inadequate on general grounds, owing to individual and mass response to higher and varied appeals. Secondly, they are narrow and biased when they ignore the equally obvious fact that, however vast the economic significance of the struggle, our own financial magnates did not precipitate the Great War. The really sincere enemies of capitalism as an economic system belong in the ranks of the plain people of our National Army who are now in Europe fighting the plans of German capitalism and Junkerdom, for these, according to the socialist creed itself, are the sponsors of the war.

This method of upholding our national aims does not restrict the student. He merely points out that while the economic interpretation is insufficient, it is as available in the hands of our friends as in those of our foes. And the young people can be readily taught the distinction between an economic factor in history, which is altogether undeniable, and the economic interpretation of history, which of and by itself is wholly untenable. In a war which involves so many billions of treasure and such oceans of blood, young people, and the public generally, are entitled to a sympathetic version of the country's history which will admit the economic, but stress the idealistic, forces underlying our development.

The charge of casuistry would at once blast any attempt to ignore the economic thread in American history. It thrusts itself forward most brazenly from bargaining with Indians to coal profiteering in 1917. But that is not the whole story. It is the shell rather than the spirit of our history. Overcurious researches may yet discover that excessive crowding in old England did more than religious zeal to populate New England. But plain Americans know that persecution is intolerable, and the perpetuity of religious toleration, yes the very growth of Roman Catholicism in the republic, is proof abundant that toleration received an impetus in the seventeenth century which has made it a permanent value in American life.

Old ledgers and tax schedules, invoices and court files, not to speak of the slogan, "Taxation without representation is tyranny,"

may be adduced to support the contention that Revolutionary patriots were but tax dodgers who wanted a free hand and a new slate. But the doctrine that government derives its sole sanction from the consent of the governed lifts the issue from the sordid to the majestic and introduces a formula world-wide in its appeal, whose challenge in the violation of Servia and Belgium calls millions to the sword.

Land hunger and a chance at fortune drove multitudes over the Alleghanies. Yet within a generation the newer West stood forth as the nursery of freedom when Jacksonian democracy arose to displace a bank-corrupted East. In this same new West canals and railroads, speculation and peculation, brought scandal and ruin to many. They served their generation, none the less, by opening up a home for a vast and relatively homogeneous population capable of moral reactions sufficiently well defined to constitute an American spirit.

The crisis of the sixties brought two economically distinct civilizations into conflict. The outcome was decisive and one of them disappeared. But he is wrong who bounds his horizon of the war by slavery, or tariffs, or any other consideration purely economic. An intellectual gulf arising from two radically divergent theories of constitutional interpretation precipitated the struggle which forever settled the question of whether ours was a nation or a confederation. The period following the war saw us a united people. And if our unity is today disturbed by a huge population not in harmony with our national purposes, that is due once more, and most emphatically, not to a radical divergence of economic views, but to the call of blood, to latent hostility toward some of our Allies, uneradicated by a century of peace, and to a conviction perhaps that Germany is the victim and not the aggressor.

The period of the seventies to the end of the century is in some respects the most shameful in our history. Yet he is mistaken who would abandon us wholly to the lust for gold consequent upon the huge inflation of the war and the years immediately following. The plutocracy, however, is seldom the guardian of a nation's ideals, and the Granger movement, the trades-union movement, and the large increase in educational enthusiasm and opportunities,

while not devoid of a material side, were sincere steps toward a social amelioration distinctly idealistic in purpose.

The twentieth century unleashed mighty forces of altruism, and the invincible march of prohibition, of suffrage, of vice control and prevention, of prison reform, of missions, social settlements, and philanthropies is a more accurate gauge of American life than census estimates on population and wealth per capita could possibly furnish. Thousands of Americans acknowledge but one creed, namely, the motto "I serve," and the economic historian with his automaton is but a poor interpreter of the leaven which these devoted persons have introduced into the national life.

The preceding paragraphs are but hints toward the point of view which should characterize a patriotic truth-seeker in war time. Numerous illustrations from American history will at once occur to anyone who cares to support the thesis that nations possess, or can at least foster, idealism. To cull from recent events only, if our seizure of Panama was not blameless and if the Philippines are morally a liability rather than an asset, nevertheless our treatment of Cuba since 1898 and our attitude toward China after the Boxer rebellion are shining landmarks in a magnanimous world-policy. And, be it noted, both have been not without their reward. In a world then of such infinite contradictions, is that scholar who refuses to regard all facts as of equal importance, and who deliberately establishes the development of a nation's soul as a more important field of investigation than an enumeration of its financial achievements or reverses, to be condemned as a casuist seeking to whitewash the past? Is he not rather the scientific historian, intent upon his country's evolution toward a larger morality?

It is apparent that discrimination is equally important in the history of our Allies. He who would exaggerate the abuses of British sea power anteceding the war of 1812, who would, for example, dilate upon the Chesapeake affair to the disregard of a century of peace with honor, or who would magnify the Venezuela incident to the minimizing of British assistance in guaranteeing our Monroe Doctrine, is rather a soap-box orator than a historian.

Chancelleries are more cold-blooded than the people they serve, and one does not need to go far back into the history of our Allies

to find their governments almost as remote from popular influence as that of Germany is today. Particularly is this true of France. The monarchy of America's liberator, Louis XVI, was as despotic as that of the Grand Turk, and researches into the motives which animated the royal government in lending assistance to our Revolution all point to a thoroughly selfish policy of humbling England in order to restore Bourbon prestige among the courts of Europe.¹ It happened nevertheless, in this instance, that government and people were in accord, the one for dynastic, the other for liberal, reasons, and when the present ambassador from France² stresses the latter by extolling the unanimous sympathy of his eighteenth-century countrymen for our democratic aspirations, he is fully as true to history as is the archivist who explores memoirs addressed to the king upon the state of his interests and the limits of the exchequer. More than that, he is reconciling truth with the laudable purpose of deepening the sense of mutual dependence between two great peoples.

In the one hundred and thirty-nine years of Franco-American friendship, barring our troubles with the Directory, we have never had a misunderstanding with free France. The tyrannies of Napoleon I and the chicaneries of his nephew clouded the atmosphere. But they were tyrants, and their deeds are upon their own heads. No American need blush at the past record of our heroic Ally.

With Russia emancipation is so recent that, historically, our relations have been with an autocracy. Yet even the Romanoffs struck more than once a blow for freedom. Russian serfs were liberated while slavery still blotted our page. Russian warships served as pledges of friendship when an aristocratic clique in England and a court cabal in France, both in violation of their people's wishes, would have joined the South in dismembering the Union. The practical gift of Alaska, which next to the Mississippi Valley has proved to be our richest continental area, was not exactly evidence of ill will. Moreover, if one glances at the more general foreign policy of the czars he will recognize therein a

¹ E. S. Corwin, *French Policy and the American Alliance*.

² J. J. Jusserand, "Our First Alliance," *National Geographic Magazine*, June, 1917.

patronage of smaller slavie states which, had it not been blocked by Bismarck at the Congress of Berlin, might have settled the Balkans on so just a basis as to have averted the recent wars which have now ignited the entire world.¹

Our Allies and friends constitute the greater part of the civilized world. Each has had its moments of glory; if one searches far enough it may be of dishonor also. And merely as the record of all that has happened, history would take account of good and bad alike, indifferent to the moral equation, in a cold tabulation of facts. But by so doing it would fall short of its mission. In the absence throughout our great democracy of government pressure upon history teaching, it should be the pride of the historical profession to contribute toward a point of view which, without sacrifice of truth, shall enable our young people and the public at large to evaluate those contributions which we and our Allies have made to civilization. The Germans have used their *Kultur* as a justification for subjugating the whole world to its beneficent effects. No doubt many a Pan-German esteems himself a veritable missionary, converting the world to *Kultur* by the same time-honored method which Karl the Great employed in convincing the Saxons of their Druidical errors. Shall a mock modesty or a hypocritical exaggeration of our faults debar us then from a portrayal of those achievements in arts and sciences which entitle the Entente to at least an equality with the Central Powers, and of that political experience and wisdom in which the heirs of Magna Charta so brilliantly surpass the benighted mediaevalists under William's bloody yoke?

The years since August, 1914, have of a truth made history. But he is no fit teacher who explains it all by one little economic hypothesis, or who is so lost among the trees of isolated events that he fails to behold the forest of conflict between right and wrong. The battle is eternal, the victory never final. But to us and to our Allies belong many crosses won in valiant service of the truth. And it is the mission of history to link these glories of the day with those of the ages. The process demands a proper selection for

¹ Hazen, Thayer, Lord, and Coolidge, *Three Peace Congresses of the XIXth Century and Claimants to Constantinople*.

emphasis, and though the historian retains an undiminished freedom to delve into the muck of past iniquity, a decent respect for the opinion of mankind bids him hold equally in view the achievements of national honor and integrity. With the entire community activity modified by war conditions, it is not unreasonable that historians should share the inspiration of their contemporaries and, by so much as their view of the past is more embracing, should orientate the present as a pivot-point for the future. He who charts the seas becomes thereby the better pilot. And if the grandeur of the tempest and the sight of port affect the helmsman more profoundly than they do the untraveled passenger, this larger vision merely verifies the former's mastery of his craft. Emphatically the war duty of the historian is not to gloss over the past, not to bury unpleasant secrets, not to indulge in hypocritical assertions that our country has always been white in a world mostly black, but rather the constructive task of demonstrating that ours is a great people with a record worth maintaining, among whom recent and present trends indicate even a further movement forward as the logical outgrowth from deep and worthy roots in an honorable past.